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ABSTRACT

The refinement and application of the School Organizational Climate Questionnaire (SOCQ), an instrument for measuring organizational climate, is described in this report. The instrument is a mechanism by which schools can direct their school improvement efforts. In two case studies, a small urban elementary and a large urban secondary school utilized a school improvement process that involved assessment, feedback, discussion and reflection, and development of school improvement strategies. Findings indicate that the data obtained from the instrument are useful in determining school readiness prior to initiative implementation and in assessing and targeting specific aspects of school climate. School climate is a crucial predictor of teacher performance; a realistic measure of educational environment therefore provides a useful framework for improvement efforts. Two figures and one table are included. (10 references) (LMI)

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SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Over the last decade school improvement literature has consistently identified school organizational climate as one of the main factors contributing to the effectiveness of a school (Creemers, Peters & Reynolds, 1989). Tye (1974) takes the term to mean that set of factors that give the organization a personality , a spirit, a culture. Just as climate, in the meteorological sense, refers to the average weather conditions of a given place over a period of time, organizational climate refers to the average perceptions individuals hold about their work environment. The identification of a school's organizational climate along a variety of dimensions can not only contribute to understanding a schools functioning but also help gauge a school's readiness for change and help guide school improvement efforts. Fullan (1986) cites numerous research studies supporting the importance of climate in influencing the success of a school's efforts to change. Further, a focus on the school environment or climate has been advocated as one of the key ingredients in the research into school effectiveness and school improvement (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1987 and Miller and Lieberman, 1988) It follows that the use of a reliable instrument to assess the organizational climate would seem to be valuable mechanism by which schools could direct their school improvement efforts.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Much of the past research on school organizational climate has sought to measure individual perceptions through the use of a range of instruments designed for specific types of organizations. Probably the most widely used instruments for measuring organizational climate has been the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire [OCDQ] of Halpin and Croft (1963) and the Work Environment Scale [WES] of Moos (1974). Both these instruments have served as a basis for the development of new instruments deemed more suitable to school environments. Such is the case for both the School-Level Environment Questionnaire (Rentoul & Fraser,1983) and the School Organizational Climate Questionnaire (Giddings & Dellar, 1989) This paper describes the further refinement and use of the latter instrument (the SOCQ) in guiding school improvement efforts in Australian schools.

REFINEMENT OF THE SOCQ

The unrefined version of the SOCQ contained six scales with eight items per scale for both the Actual and Preferred versions of the form. Each item had a five-point Likert format with responses of strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Of the 48 items approximately half were scored in reverse. The initial version of the SOCQ was administered in twenty three secondary schools drawn from eleven metropolitan school districts in Perth Western Australia. The resulting data were subjected to

item analysis in order to identify items whose removal would enhance each scale's internal consistency and discriminant validity. To improve the internal consistency of each scale items with low item-remainder correlations were removed or rewritten. To improve discriminant validity, items whose correlation with its a priori assigned scale was lower that its correlation with any of the other scales, were removed or rewritten. For instance, the existing scale of "Administrative Control" was widely perceived as having a negative connotation and was therefore replaced. A rewording of each item of this scale produced a reverse scale entitled "Staff Autonomy". In addition a new scale "School Commitment" was included with the aim of assessing teachers perceptions of the degree to which other teachers were supportive of, and committed to, their school.

The refined version of the SOCQ (Table 1) contains seven scales (School Commitment, Peer Cohesion, Professional Involvement, Participatory Decision-Making, Staff Autonomy, Innovation). Each scale has eight items constituting a total of 56 items for both the actual and preferred forms. Each new set of items were reviewed by a number of researchers who had developed or used instruments for assessing school climate. On the basis of such reviews draft forms of the actual and preferred questionnaire were constructed then field tested by secondary school teachers.

[Insert table 1 about here]

THE SOCQ AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The refined version of the SOCQ has been utilized in a number of elementary and secondary schools with the specific aim of guiding the schools' improvement efforts. The basic strategy employed by schools and the researchers followed four fundamental phases:

1. Assessment. The actual and preferred forms of the SOCQ were administered to school personnel.

2. Feedback. Mean scores on each scale on the actual and preferred forms were calculated. These scores were then graphed to enable variance between the actual and preferred climate along each scale to be noted. A brief report derived from the data and containing the graph was presented to the school.

3. Discussion and Reflection. Staff meetings were convened to allow further discussion of any discrepancies between the actual and preferred results. School personnel were then encouraged to determine which dimension(s) or scales might be targeted for school improvement efforts.

4. Strategies for Improvement. Having identified targets for improvement, school personnel and the researchers designed specific strategies that could be implemented to improve the organizational climate. It was also suggested that the actual form of the SOCQ be re-administered after a suitable period of time to assess the extent to which selected strategies had improved the organizational climate of the school.

CASE STUDY SUMMARIES

Two case study summaries are presented as examples of school improvement efforts undertaken in both an Elementary and Secondary School. These summaries have been organized around the four phases outlined above.

Case One: Fernwood Primary School

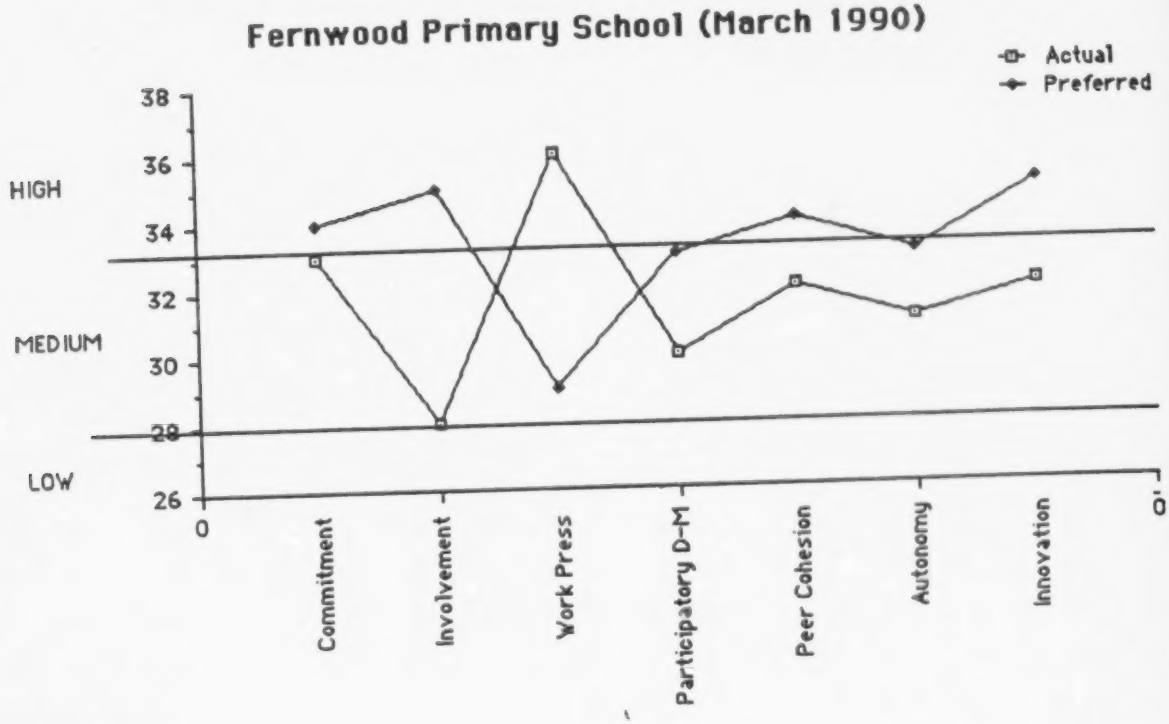
Fernwood is a small urban elementary school with a staff of 21 and a student population of 340. All full-time staff at the school completed the School Organizational Climate Questionnaire five weeks prior to a prearranged professional development period. The intention was that part of this professional development period would be given over to a formal presentation of the results, accompanied by a full staff discussion of the data.

Feedback

Multiple copies of a brief summary report were distributed to staff one week prior to the professional development activities. After a brief introductory address about the notion of organizational climate the profile of the Fernwood Organizational Climate was presented to the staff. A description of each scale was undertaken along with an explanation of the procedure used to classify mean scores as high, medium or low. Attention was next focused on the discrepancies between the "Actual" and the "Preferred" scores (see Figure 1) for each of the seven scales.

FIGURE 1

Discrepencies between Actual and Preferred Scores on the SOCQ
for Ferndale Elementary School



Discussion and Reflection

In order to facilitate further interpretation and reflection on the findings five small discussion groups were formed. Each group was given the same brief; to identify the scales with the largest discrepancies and to rank these scales in order of perceived importance. On completing this exercise each group was called on to present their views to the whole group so that agreement might be reached about targeting aspects of the organizational climate for improvement efforts.

There was consensus among the staff that both the "Work Pressure" and "Professional Involvement" scales be targeted. In both cases the organizational climate profile had indicated a large discrepancy between actual and preferred scores of these scales. A lively discussion ensued about possible external and internal causes contributing to the discrepancies on these scales. Ministry of Education policies concerning curriculum and administrative changes were blamed for much of the work pressure being experienced by teachers.

Similarly a lack of Ministry (system) resourcing and the limited availability of staff release time were cited as causes of dissatisfaction about professional development. Internal factors which were identified as contributing to high work pressure and low professional involvement included: extra curricula duties; particularly playground duty and informal interviews with parents; preparation overload; and limited awareness of, and access to, credible professional development courses.

Strategies for Improvement

Retaining their existing group membership the participants were asked to generate some specific strategies they might employ to improve the "work pressure and professional involvement" aspects of Fernwood's organizational climate. Generally the groups felt that as classroom teachers they were powerless to influence existing Ministry policy and preferred instead to focus on school level factors. Consequently, the strategies and procedures suggested all concerned actions that could be implemented within the school.

To reduce work pressure the existing playground duty roster was to be changed. Instead of a constant commitment to a particular day of the week, teachers would undertake a mid-week to mid-week cyclic duty for a much reduced period of time. Such an arrangement it was argued would result in longer periods of "free" time for staff. In addition it was suggested that through a series of newsletters, the school formally advise parents that requests for parent/teacher interviews must be made through the senior administrators of the school and that staff would not be generally available for contact prior to the commencement of the teaching day.

To increase professional involvement among the staff it was suggested that a teacher network be established with and between schools in the same Ministry District. This network would allow for the exchange of teaching ideas as well as information about the cost and availability of particular in-service programmes. As a means of establishing such a network it was suggested that a news letter be distributed to all elementary schools of the district. Each school would in turn take responsibility for accepting communiques, editing, printing and distributing the newsletter. A further suggestion relating to professional involvement was the allocation of a regular timeslot at each monthly general staff meeting for the purposes of addressing professional development issues.

Case Two: Hillview Senior High School

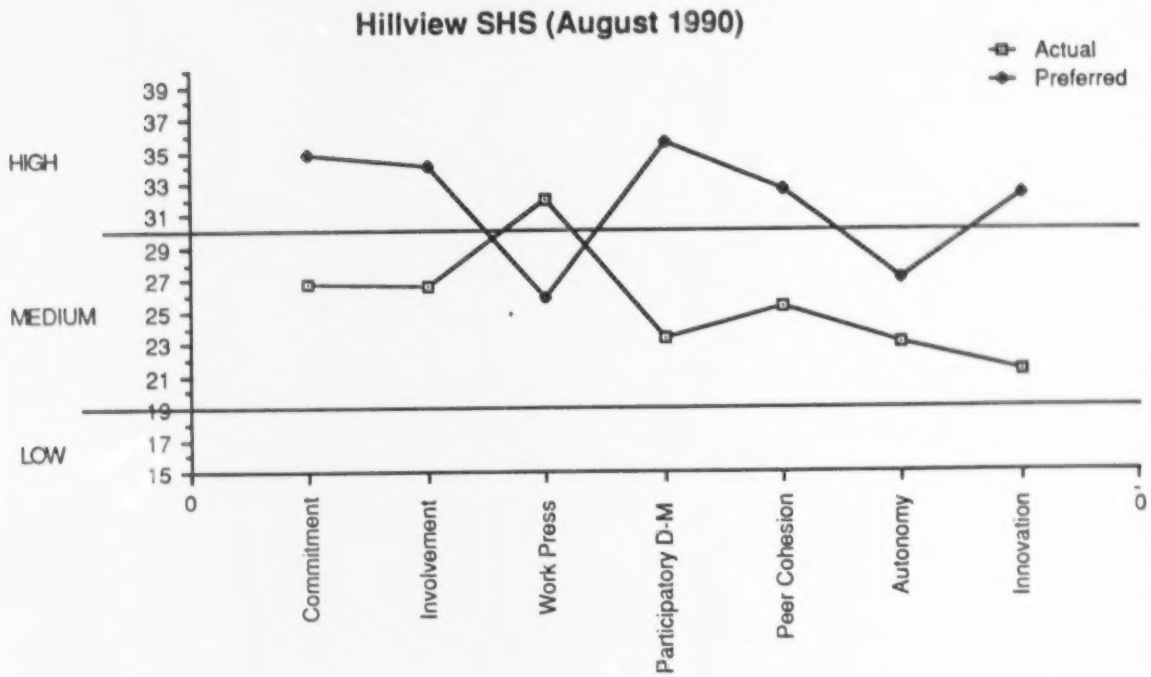
Hillview is a large urban secondary school with a staff of 105 and a student population of 1200. The principal, being new to the school, wanted to gain some insight into the prevailing climate of the school so that he might be in a more informed position to undertake school development planning. Unlike Fernwood Elementary School, the administration, scoring and profiling of the school's climate was undertaken by members of the school community. Given that administration of the SOCQ to all staff would pose problems in processing the data it was suggested that a stratified sample of used. Five staff were drawn from each of the seven curriculum teaching areas. In addition the Librarian, School Psychologist and members of the administration were included in the sample. Once scoring and profiling procedures were completed a general staff meeting was called to discuss the findings.

Feedback

The principal and the chairperson of the staff association sought researcher assistance to clarify aspects of the profile and facilitate staff discussion about the implications of the questionnaire results. Consequently, an introductory explanation similar to that given for the Fernwood staff was undertaken. Particular attention was given to the procedures used for the classification of scores and profiling the organizational climate of Hillview. Graphical representations of the profile was displayed (see Figure 2) and the notion of discrepancy analysis between the "Actual" and "Preferred" scores along each scale was reviewed.

FIGURE 2

Discrepencies between Actual and Preferred Scores on the SOCQ
for Hillview Senior High School



Discussion and Reflection

Discussion groups were formed in such a way as to involve staff from different teaching areas within each group. It was hoped that such a mixed membership would lessen a subject areas perspective of school organizational climate and foster a whole-school approach to discussion. Each group was asked to identify those scales with the largest discrepancy and then to discuss which of these scales might be targeted for improvement endeavours. When this initial discussion period was called to an end each group shared their views with the rest of the staff. While some relatively large discrepancies existed along several scales it was finally agreed that two scales become the focus for improvement. The first scale was that of "Participatory Decision-Making" and the second was "Innovation". Retaining the existing small group structure, participants were next asked to identify possible explanations for the perceived lack of participatory decision-making and innovation in the school. These discussionss would be used to generate a range of strategies that could be implemented to increase the amount of participation and innovation undertaken in the school.

The most frequently offered explanation for the perceived lack of participation in decision-making was that the former principal had blocked any attempt to involve staff in the decision-making process. Under his autocratic leadership, decisions were made by the principal alone and usually with limited input from a restricted number of staff members. While a set of procedures existed that enabled senior staff to have input into decisions, such senior staff reported a sense of frustration when their collective input was ignored or important decisions deferred and delayed until a following meeting. It was apparent that at the individual classroom classroom teacher level there was even less opportunity to voice opinions or have influence over any decisions concerning the school. General staff meetings were seldom held and when they were they served as venues for the dissemination of Ministry of Education information, rather that forums for the discussion of key issues.

There were two commonly offered explanations for perceived lack of innovation. However, it must be pointed out that the voicing of these explanations resulted in some heated argument. The first was related to the lack of opportunity for participation in decision making within the school. While time was allotted for subject area meetings several teaching areas had dispensed with them altogether. Given the normal daily demands on time and energy confronting the classroom teacher these subject area meetings provided one of the best opportunities for discussion of new curricula developments and innovative teaching approaches. Those teaching areas that still held regular meetings used them as a means of communicating Ministry or Education policy developments or school/teaching department administrative issues. Consequently little emphasis was being placed on innovation. The second explanation for the perceived lack of innovation concerned the traditional and conservative staff profile of the school. Many teachers at the school had been on staff for a considerable period of time; some in excess of 25 years. While such staff were no doubt experienced educators they were demonstrably resistant to change; particularly curriculum changes. New approaches to teaching and related innovations were generally perceived as fads. As one teacher stated:

> *"If I wait long enough what I have been doing for the last thirty years will be considered innovative"*

Strategies for Improvement

Retaining the existing group membership participants were asked to generate possible strategies for improving both participatory decision-making and innovation aspects of the school's organizational climate. While a range of possible strategies were suggested there was general agreement on two that might improve participatory decision-making and to make the school more innovative. Interestingly the strategies where interrelated.

The first strategy to improve participatory decision-making was the formation of a school management team. This body would be comprised of the principal, senior administrators and representatives from the seven subject teaching areas (not necessarily subject department heads). The management team would accept input from classroom teachers and work in collaboration to make decisions affecting the school. The second and related strategy was to hold regular general staff meetings to be chaired by the staff association. These meetings would serve as forums to discuss school issues and communicate directly with members of the school management team.

To improve the innovative nature of the school a networking arrangement between schools and tertiary institutions for the sharing of ideas was suggested. Unlike the Fernwood Primary School suggestion this network was to be primarily subject-based. Consequently it was suggested that regular subject meetings would be re-introduced in all teaching areas. These meetings would focus on information about educational innovations that emerged through the network. In addition it was suggested that the General Staff Meetings be used to discuss innovations that related to whole-school issues.

SUMMARY

The positive reactions among principals and staff in Western Australia indicate that the above strategies to direct school improvement efforts have been found to be most useful in providing a focus for school-based professional development activities. The SOCQ is viewed as providing a convenient, meaningful and informative mechanism by which data about the prevailing and preferred school climate can be tapped. The resulting information can be used in several ways. First, to gauge the school's readiness for change prior to the introduction of specific improvement initiatives. Second, the SOCQ permits school personnel to assess and to target specific aspects of the climate for improvement efforts. This school-level approach to improvement aims at a transformation of the organizational climate existing in the school. Edmonds (1984) reports that the nature of the school [which may be interpreted as school climate] clearly emerges as among the most powerful predictors of teacher performance; in this sense, the total school environment appears to have the capacity to depress or elevate individual teachers' capacity for effective teaching. While more research into the use of school climate instruments is clearly indicated, the use of such instruments as the SOCQ appears to provide a useful framework for improvement efforts.

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TABLE 1

Descriptive Information for each Scale

Scale	Description	Sample Item
Commitment	Extent to which teachers are supportive of and committed to the school	Teachers' loyalty to the school is not considered important (-)
Professional Involvement	Extent to which teachers are concerned about their work and committed to professional development	Many teachers attend inservice and other professional development courses (+)
Work Pressure	Extent to which the press of work dominates the job.	You can take it easy and still get your work done. (-)
Participatory Decision-making	Extent to which teachers are encouraged to participate in the school's decision-making process.	The school administration encourages staff to be involved in seeking solutions to school problems. (+)
Staff Autonomy	Extent to which staff have autonomy over their work lives within the school	The school administration monitors closely the classroom activities of teachers. (-)
Peer Cohesion	Extent to which teachers are friendly towards and supportive of one another.	Teachers take a personal interest in one another. (+)
Innovation	Extent to which variety, change and new approaches are encouraged in the school.	New approaches to things are rarely tried. (-)